

**Opening Statement of
The Honorable Tom Feeney, Ranking Republican
Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics
Hearing on “NASA’s *Exploration Initiative: Status and Issues*”
April 3, 2008**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today’s important hearing on NASA’s Exploration Initiative. I also want to thank our witnesses for appearing. Your perspectives and expertise are immensely valuable as we carry out our oversight responsibilities and prepare legislation to reauthorize NASA.

Human space exploration defines America as the world’s preeminent spacefaring nation. Images of Shuttle and Apollo are deeply ingrained in American culture – both our domestic version and the version exported to the rest of the world. Thousands – sometimes hundreds of thousands – of Americans and foreigners come to Florida’s Space Coast to witness a Shuttle launch. And for the latest launch held at 2:28 AM, a sizeable Congressional delegation flew down after final votes in order to watch night turn into day. For all the respect and support I have for NASA’s satellite missions, those launches don’t draw these crowds.

NASA’s human spaceflight program is in the midst of a once in a generation transformation brought about by the Columbia accident. We are excited by the promise of human exploration beyond low Earth orbit for the first time in over 35 years. NASA’s Constellation Program is developing the Orion crew exploration vehicle and the Ares 1 and Ares 5 launch vehicles. This architecture will give NASA the ability to return Americans to the Moon by 2019 and establish a scientific outpost so we can gain the expertise to advance human exploration beyond the Moon.

But these changes come with significant costs. Earlier this week NASA released preliminary estimates of the impact to the human spaceflight workforce from this transition to a new generation of spaceflight vehicles. I know this hearing is not intended to focus on transition issues. But I want to reiterate my concern about the length of this gap and the potential loss of the skilled workforce needed to continue human spaceflight under the Constellation program. Mr. Chairman, I understand that you intend to hold a hearing later this year to examine NASA’s Shuttle transition planning. I look forward to working with you on that hearing because of its utmost importance to Florida’s Space Coast.

In the wake of the Columbia accident, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board correctly observed that America’s human spaceflight program lacked a strategy and direction. We have halted that drift. America has established a strategy and an architecture of how to achieve our goals.

We now need stability. We have had enough turmoil and change. If we change the strategy and architecture every few years, we will revert to pre-Columbia behavior. And

we will have similar results including the very real prospect of being grounded for several years while other nations – especially China – strive for space preeminence.

As the Columbia Accident Investigation Board correctly noted:

It is the view of the Board that the previous attempts to develop a replacement vehicle for the aging shuttle represented a failure of national leadership

Since Columbia, we – the President, Congress, and the space community – have demonstrated the needed leadership. In over five years, we have come a long way since those terrible dark days in February 2005. Let's keep that progress in mind as we look forward to the challenges ahead.